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Planning working futures: precarious work through carceral space

Abstract

Geographies of precarious work are advanced through an eight month qualitative study of prisoners nearing release from HMP Brixton in London, providing a spatial rendering of working uncertainty. This builds on geographical scholarship highlighting the *porosity* of prison walls such that carceral space is understood as *non-totalising* yet *extensive*. Release on Temporary License (ROTL) is examined as a mechanism of such porosity, allowing offenders to undertake work outside prison. Within the context of the rehabilitation agenda in England and Wales that emphasises the generative function of prison time, we frame the ROTL as a *flow* mechanism that anticipates both the end of the custodial sentence and precarious work. Experiences of such precariousness emerge through prisoners' processes of *planning* for future work through states of suspension, compulsion and experimentation. The focus on planning work contributes to understandings firstly of the porosity of carceral space and secondly of labour precarity. Firstly, it highlights the *frictions* in the flow mechanism of the ROTL, such that the porosity of carceral space cannot be understood as seamless mobility. Secondly, these frictions indicate how the structural condition of labour precarity can be lived through forms of mundane stability that might be generative as well as exhausting.

Key words: carceral space, flow, friction, planning work, precarity

Introduction

In tandem with sociology, geographical scholarship in Northern Europe and North America has identified a contemporary condition of working uncertainty that is insecure, non-standard or precarious (e.g. Kalleberg 2000; 2009; Lewis et al 2015; Strauss 2017; Waite 2009). To advance geographies of precarious work, this article focuses on prisoners nearing release from HMP Brixton in London to provide a spatial rendering of working uncertainty. Our thesis is that prisoners' processes of planning the 'last-mile' of their sentence and the 'first-mile out' produce a spatial and temporal condition that is symptomatic of wider working uncertainties. We therefore build on carceral geography scholarship that has centred on the lived experiences that produce spaces of enclosure, such as prisons and detention centres (Martin and Mitchelson 2009; Mountz et 2013; Moran et al 2017). This research highlights the *porosity* of the prison walls through the day-to-day movements of goods, people and imaginations (Follis 2015; Turner 2016). Such porosity means carceral space is *non-totalising* and *extensive*: neither completely regulated within nor confined to the physical prison walls (Moran et al 2013). We provide a further example of this porosity of incarceration through a focus on the mechanism of Release on Temporary License (ROTL) (Turner 2013; Maddrell 2017). The ROTL allows offenders, generally nearing the end of their sentence, to undertake work activities outside the prison. The experience of the prisoner on ROTL is thus an illustration of the porosity of prison boundaries that occurs through anticipation of future work. The ROTL is a *flow* mechanism intended to anticipate both the end of the prison sentence – through phased resettlement – and

precarious working futures – through opportunities for sometimes paid, often temporary employment.

So, as well as exemplifying the disrupted ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ of prison, the figure of the prisoner granted ROTL is also a precarious worker. However, there can be a significant mismatch between the work opportunities open to prisoners on ROTL and their skills and aspirations. Therefore, rather than examining the porosity of carceral space through the work placements undertaken by prisoners (Horne and Maddrell 2002; Maddrell 2017), we focus on their experiences of *planning* for work post-release whilst in prison but already (or soon-to-be) granted ROTL. Planning for life beyond prison is a core constitutive element of the current emphasis on ‘rehabilitation’ in the prison service in England and Wales (UK Government 2016b). Rather than retribution, incapacitation or deterrence, this rehabilitative purpose of prison shifts focus onto the generative capacities of experiences of incarceration by emphasising the responsibilities of the prisoner to ‘resettle’. The prison is thus necessarily a site where working futures must be planned. Therefore our focus on prisoners’ experiences of planning contributes to understandings firstly of the porosity of carceral space and secondly of precarious work. Firstly, planning highlights the *frictions* in the flow mechanism of the ROTL such that the porosity of carceral space cannot be understood as a seamless or straightforward flow ‘in’ and ‘out’. This is because rather than immediate placement at work, the granting of the ROTL often heralds periods of waiting, deferral and interruptions *in* prison rather than cumulative opportunities for release. Secondly, planning through such a sense of delay illustrates how conditions that from one perspective appear as unstable and precarious, occur from another perspective through forms of mundane stability or even “immobilisation and stasis” (Peters and Turner 2017, 3; Bissell 2007). In our example, the uncertainty and precarity of the prisoner vis-à-vis the formal labour market is inversely comprised of routine, repetition and queuing generated by the institutional rhythms of the prison.

Therefore, the planning prisoner granted ROTL inhabits a carceral space constituted by forms of flow and friction that indicate how conditions of labour precarity can produce practices of mundane stability that might be generative as well as exhausting. To develop this argument, firstly we introduce our ethnographic approach in HMP Brixton that finds one beginning with biscuits and tea. Rather than a long term embedded ethnography, our research necessarily involved movement ‘in’ and ‘out’ of our field site, with restrictions and uncertainties even once access had nominally been granted. Our own movements were therefore illustrative of some of the broader possibilities for and challenges of crossing the prison walls that we sought to investigate. Secondly, we elaborate on conceptualisations of this porosity of carceral space. The insights of carceral geographers are shown to illuminate broader arguments concerning the contemporary ‘flow-form’ of institutional organisation of social space and time. These non-totalising and extensive spaces and times necessitate individual ‘mobility skills’, including planning processes, with ambivalent implications. Thirdly, we show how, with the institution of the prison, such planning occurs through the ROTL as a flow mechanism that is rationalised by the current rehabilitation agenda in England and Wales. Rehabilitation emerges partially as

a response to overcrowded prisons through enhancing the ‘employability’ of prisoners so as to reduce re-offending rates. The flows enabled by ROTL both produce and respond to the destabilisation of employment and thus position rehabilitation as a destabilisation in the conduct of life that encourages contrary modes of subjugation and self-empowerment (Lorey 2015). The fourth section indicates how planning produces and responds to these forms of destabilization, fleshing out experiences of suspension, compulsion and experimentation as constitutive of the flows and frictions of conditions of labour precarity¹.

Biscuits, tea and researching planning at HMP Brixton

Our research on the relationship between incarceration and ‘making work’ outside of prison began with biscuits and tea. Our methods were ethnographic in sensibility: we would spend time with men who live on one of HMP Brixton’s wings, mixing informal conversation with more structured discussion groups. We brought homemade biscuits to the first two of our discussion groups, following the consent of the wing’s custodial manager. We were aware that this act might be read as a coercive gesture: both by prisoners themselves, and later our academic colleagues. But these two occasions were cold Saturday afternoons in early 2016, when it felt appropriate to bring something that evoked ‘home’ to an event that was also very clearly introduced as part of a research project. On the first occasion, we had planned to have the biscuits at the end of the session, but it ended up being more appropriate to eat and chat. In a sense, the biscuits served as an act of ‘breaking bread’ as a group, of creating a slightly more hospitable environment despite the lack of chairs in the room. In our second discussion group, one of the prisoners asked us if we want a cup of tea. On that cold winter afternoon, a cup of tea was a welcomed gesture, but also we later realised that our acceptance of this offer was key to building trust with someone who eventually became a key interlocutor. This ritual was our way into one of the major challenges facing the UK criminal justice service today: how prisons and prisoners plan for work post-release.

The themes of making plans for, and negotiating the constitution of, work mirror our own separate research journeys. We share an interest in the porous spaces and times of urban life and work that complicate normative ideas of occupation and formal career development. One of us has examined diverse spatial practices of work in English cities (Richardson 2013; 2016; 2017) and the other has focused on informal economies in the urban global South (Thieme 2013; 2015; 2017). Linking these seemingly disparate field sites is an interest in the relationship between the changing experiences of work and the ways these changes are constitutive of the city as ‘workplace’. Such a phenomenology of labour seeks to thicken the plot, or ‘braid narratives’, of urban working uncertainties; to offer a sense of the sometimes contradictory yet often simultaneous experiences of survivalism and entrepreneurship (Berner *et al* 2012). Within this context, the prison serves as an exemplary confluence of plans made

¹ For ethical purposes, where we include quotes and interview material from our interlocutors, all the names are pseudonyms.

and broken in the ‘multifaceted strategy of urban survival’ (Simone 2004: 118) in which anticipation and deception, experimentation and anxiety, normative defiance and compliance, are all at play. Focusing on male offenders nearing the end of their prison sentence, our research set out to examine these men’s conceptions and experiences of ‘work’, together with their associated future aspirations and perceived opportunities.

HMP Brixton accommodates circa 810 male prisoners, with 80% of these men from London boroughs. Roughly weekly over an eight-month period, we spent the early evening hours (and some weekend afternoons) on C Wing, conducting either informal interviews in all corners and four landings of the Wing, or semi-structured discussion groups in a small meeting room on the ground floor. C Wing was ‘D-Cat’, a category of security denoting prisoners that could be ‘reasonably trusted not to try to escape’, and thus are eligible to apply for ROTL. There were *specific features* to this carceral environment of HMP Brixton that we were interested in. As an inner London prison, HMP Brixton offered possibilities for prisoners on ROTL to immediately ‘re-enter’ the city, unlike prisons located in rural or suburban areas. It is just a short walk out of the prison gate along Jebb Avenue before you reach Brixton Hill, a major London bus route. This potentially meant a volume and variety of possible job opportunities, although as we will go on to discuss, much of the work that prisoners undertook was the ‘low-skill’ activity (such as construction) that supports London’s property market and attendant financial sector. The juxtaposition of fried chicken joints, pawn shops and hipster cafes that ROTL workers pass on Brixton Hill is illustrative of these contradictions and anachronisms of ‘progress’: fragments of African-Caribbean and working class pasts alongside high-end services for professional renters and future rentiers.

As our research continued, we also saw how HMP Brixton exhibited *general features* of contemporary problems with the prison service in England and Wales (expanded below). Whilst the prison housed some outwardly facing projects to ‘skill’ prisoners for re-entry, such as Bad Boys Bakery (featured in the TV series of celebrity chef Gordon Ramsay) and the Clink (a restaurant in the prison where the public can eat), these masked something of a crisis elsewhere in HMP Brixton. During our research, there were constant staff shortages due to sick leave, the governor left unexpectedly, and this culminated in the closure of the D-Cat facility, and along with it the ROTL programme in November 2016. These difficulties, particularly short staffing, were very evident to us as researchers moving in and out of the prison. For months, despite access having been granted, we depended on the good will and availability of staff to move us from the gate to the wing. We later realised that we should have been given a key holder pass that would allow us into and out of the different areas of the prison without excessive interrogation at the gate. This research process then illustrated the porosity - or idiosyncracies of movement in and out - of prison, and also posed challenges to elements of ethnographic method. Our iterative presence combined with the high turn-over of prisoners on C wing meant that most visits involved rehashing and refining our ‘pitch’, to explain what our research was about, who we were, and why we were interested in the working experiences of these men who live in prison.

So unlike more conventional schools of ethnography that assume long periods of observation in situ (Marcus 1986), we adapted the method to the specificities of our (and our interlocutors') intermittent presence in what was nominally a space of enclosure. Ours is not an ethnography of the prison itself nor of inmates' experience from trial to release, but rather captures a particular space and time in the lives of prisoners as they face the uncertainties of work at the end of their sentence. That which most obviously marks out our method from other approaches to understanding experiences of incarceration is that we deliberately did not seek to take prisoners off the wing for interviews. Instead, we spoke and saw prisoners on the wing, many of whom had returned from work outside prison and were 'digesting the day', changing their 'outside work clothes' to their sweat pants and t-shirts. We timed our visits from 5pm-8pm to sense this transition between their hours of 'visibility' to the public, and the return to the wing where officers called them by their last names. We wanted to be seen ourselves and become familiar to the gaze of prisoners. We also became acutely aware that with whom we spoke and spent time might mean something within the micro-politics of prisoner social dynamics. As these became more legible as time went on, we were careful not to occupy the same corners of the wing, nor to gravitate too quickly to the same prisoners. This is not to say that our presence on the wing produced a more or less 'authentic' account, but rather to emphasise the ways it opened alternative possibilities for engagement of individuals and topics.

Given this, our visits occurred through a variety of perhaps unusual research activities to 'break the ice' and earn trust through 'deep hanging out' (Geertz 1998) near the ping pong table, the dominoes corner; letting conversations emerge iteratively. For the more structured interviews, we orientated our conversations around questions of 'occupation' – the experience of being 'at work', the motivation for doing 'work' – that are rarely asked of prisoners (or so we were told). These questions provided understanding of how prisoners identified with different working practices and how their conceptions of their own skills and opportunities informed their planning processes for work and life post-release. But for many of the more unstructured conversations, topics veered away from 'paid work' and pertained to other forms of labour: the labour of staying connected to the lives of loved ones, the labour involved in saving some money despite the meager earnings of ROTL work to prepare for life on the outside, the labour required to keep positive despite daily set backs with the paperwork, the release date, the early lock downs if the prison was short staffed and trouble had sparked on another wing. Standing next to the pool table watching others play, or sitting over a game of chess for 45 minutes with 'slow' dialogue to match the pace of the game and 'the next move', conversations could last two minutes or two hours, and could go from witty banter to personal stories of loss and the anxieties that occupied many waking (and 'sleeping') hours.

In total, we engaged with over 40 prisoners, 10 of whom became key interlocutors. Five of these we have also seen outside the prison at or on their way back from their place of work. We could never presume to "know" what it would be or feel like to be incarcerated, nor were

we ever interested in knowing what these men were “in for”. But the ethnographic sensibility that was born from spending time in the mundane corners of leisure and boredom of the wing granted us a window into the lives of these men that interviews off the wing would never have afforded. It is such movement ‘outside’, challenging incarceration as totalising enclosure, that has been examined in conceptualisations of carceral space, explored next.

The porosity of carceral space

In its empirical focus on prisons and detention centres, geographical research on experiences of incarceration has highlighted the porosity of carceral space through the movements of people, things and imaginations. This porosity casts incarceration as a ‘*non-totalising*’ (McWatters 2013, 199, our emphasis) formal arrangement, that is *extensive* in that its substance is ‘not restricted to the space contained by the permeable wall of the prison’ (Moran et al 2013, 111). Rather than the ‘total institution’ (Goffman 1961) of spatial containment and linear temporal regulation, prisons are understood as ‘dynamic spaces, replete with temporal flows and social encounters that defy absolutist conceptions of prisons as monolithic capsules of space and time’ (McWatters *ibid.*). This ‘non-totalising’ constitution of carceral space means that the state of incarceration is experienced differently, requiring a focus on individual forms of inhabitation. Such lived experiences of prison produce ‘plastic, fluid and manifold’ spaces (*ibid.*) that occur through imaginative as well as material movements from inside and outside (Gacek 2017; Peters and Turner 2017). Thus this non-totalising space is nonetheless *extensive* for the ways in which carceral institutions have expression beyond their formal delineation. The movements of goods and people through ‘transcarceral spaces’ (Moran et al 2013) contest the binary taxonomy of ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ (Baer and Ravneberg 2008), and illustrate the integration of incarceration into wider social and economic processes (Follis 2015; Turner 2016; Maddrell 2017; Nowakowski 2013). Instead of unwanted confinement, the extensions of carceral space can produce incarceration as a necessary, even desirable state, for example through modes of ‘attachment to prison’ as a ‘domestic regime’ (Turner 2013, 489).

These illustrations from geographers of the porosity of carceral space are symptomatic of wider debates concerning shifts in the institutional regulation of social space and time. For example, Deleuze (1992) picked up Foucault’s (1975) emphasis on the transience of eighteenth and nineteenth century models of disciplinary society, organised through spaces of enclosure of which the prison is a preeminent example. In their place, Deleuze pointed to a new model of spatial and temporal order consisting of ‘free-floating control’, replacing the ‘old disciplines operating in the time frame of a closed system’ (p. 4). Whilst spaces of enclosure have a distinctive form - a ‘mould’ – these new controls are ‘modulations’ that are self-deforming through continuous change (*ibid.*). Within this context of ‘free-floating control’, there is a necessity to rethink the space and time of the institution. In this vein regarding the prison, Mincke (2017, 244) argues that its spatiotemporal morphology – the representation of experiences of incarceration – must shift from ‘limit-form to flow-form.’ Whilst the former was ‘given sense through borders’ that ‘depended on temporal stability’, the latter involves

constant change, even if slow, that ‘prevents borders from gaining stability’ (ibid.). This is a spatial rendering of the social in which space is decoupled from ‘closure and stasis’ and instead becomes ‘heterogeneity and liveliness’ (Massey 2005, 19), although there is an ambivalence to these new freedoms that might be enslaving as much as liberating.

This ambivalence arises because the porosity of carceral space reconfigures rather than ends forms of control over the social and individual body. The shift to ‘free-floating control’ is a dispersed one that finds form across different institutional systems (Deleuze 1992). Together with the prison system, where there are extensions of processes of confinement through the use of ‘electronic collars that force the convicted person to stay at home during certain hours’, there are also the ways that ‘humans no longer pass through the old factory form’ in the new corporate system (ibid. p. 7). Thus in this reading, the reconfiguration of control indicated by the porosity of carceral space is of the same order as the destabilisations of employment that constitute experiences of precarious work. *Apparent acquittal* – a clear (start and) end point to the present sentence or job in hand – is replaced by *limitless postponements* – extensions through differentiating grammars of sentence or attributes of the job (p.5). Performance of such limitless postponement is achieved through ‘perpetual training’ (ibid.) such that a worker is never quite contained by the job, always orientated towards the next opportunity. In the prison system, perpetual training might be understood as the ‘mobility-skills of inmates’ (Mincke 2017, 247); those capacities allowing navigation of the constant revision of borders in flow-form incarceration. Such skills frame incarceration as a time of ‘*planning*, restorative procedures and personal initiatives’ (ibid. our emphasis) illustrative of the ambivalence of self-government in precariousness (Lorey 2015, 4). That is, as a means to ‘integrate the inmate back into society’ (Mincke ibid.), these individual plans and projects might be read both as servile subjugation and emancipatory self-empowerment (Lorey 2015, 13). The next section shows how such planning for future work occurs through the ROTL as a flow mechanism that is rationalised by the current rehabilitation agenda in England and Wales.

Rehabilitation: ROTL as flow mechanism

A confluence of events moved prisons up the news agenda in the UK in 2016. These include prison officer walkouts, leaked images (from banned mobile phones) of drug usage and other illicit activity, prisoner suicides, and the ‘disturbances’ at HMP Bedford and HMP Birmingham where prisoners ‘took control’ of areas of the prison. Whatever the purpose of prison, these instances illustrate that this is not adequately being served by the current allocation of resources. Simultaneous to this though, the then Prime Minister David Cameron announced a rehabilitation agenda for those serving custodial sentences that would prioritise making prisons sites of ‘education, work and purposeful activity’, such that ‘prisoners should be considered resources to be harnessed, not liabilities to be managed’ (UK Government 2016a; 2016b). Thus, prisons are facing pressure to improve two distinctly different aspects of their service: security and education/training, at a time of limited central government resources. NOMS

(National Offender Management Service)², which was tasked with ensuring criminal sentences are served appropriately (both in and out of prison), had seen its budget cut by 25% since 2010. The 122 prisons in England and Wales have thus had their prison officer numbers reduced by a quarter over the same period. These reductions occur within the context of the long term upwards trend in prisoner numbers. The current prison population sits at just under 86,000, almost double that of 25 years ago. Rather than significantly increasing the custodial estate though, the Ministry of Justice has been instigating a programme of prison closures, particularly targeting the older Victorian ‘jails’, although these are gradually being replaced by new (and more suburban or rural) prisons.

Within this context, the rehabilitation agenda carries even more weight, potentially reconciling the necessity to both securely incarcerate and adequately educate prisoners. The notion that prisoners might be ‘rehabilitated’ implies reductions in re-offending, less pressure on prison capacity, and therefore more staff resources to ensure prisoners are securely accommodated. Two broad approaches to such rehabilitation can be traced in the criminological literature, with elements of both present in the ROTL mechanism on which we focus. One is a model which shapes rehabilitation primarily through the reduction of risk to the public, and therefore offers little incentive to offenders to change their behaviour (Ward and Maruna 2007). The other is the ‘strengths-based or restorative approach’ that encourages offenders to pursue ‘a better life, ways of living that are constructed around core values, and concrete means of realizing their goals in certain environments’ (ibid. p. 24). As a mechanism that allows *flow* outside to do (un)paid work, education and visit family, the ROTL aligns with this second approach through the intention to enable prisoners to build on their occupational/familial strengths. However, in 2015, NOMS introduced a new ‘two-tier’ ROTL system after reports of serious offending and abscond by some who had been released on temporary license in 2013 and 2014.

The result is that there is now a ‘Standard ROTL’ which operates as normal, and a ‘Restricted ROTL’ (HMP Prisons 2015). The latter aligns with the risk management approach to rehabilitation; requiring a more stringent application process, including ‘Enhanced Behaviour Monitoring’ arrangements to produce more accurate offender risk management information and also demands that at least the first three day releases are accompanied by prison staff, therefore limiting the sorts of activities undertaken. This dual performance of rehabilitation through the ROTL as risk management and restorative opportunity is underpinned by criminological theories of desistance. Insofar as desistance is ‘produced through the interplay between individual choices and a wider range of social forces which are beyond control of individual’ (Brayford in Weaver and McNeil 2010, 38), it is by no means a straightforward path. Criminologists suggest ex-offenders must develop coherent ‘pro-social identities’ (Maruna 2001) that are ‘stabilised’ (i.e. reducing risk) through the institutions of a ‘straight’

² This was the name of the service at the time of the research. NOMS has subsequently been replaced by HMPPS (Her Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service) which launched in April 2017.

life: fixed abode, long-term partner/family and secure (legal) employment (Shapland and Bottoms 2011). This focus then retains the tendency in much criminological research and policy to emphasise the significance of individuals (with varying degrees of agency), rather than wider social ‘structures’ (see Farrall et al 2010 for discussion of structure-agency debates in criminology).

So whether the emphasis is on behavioural or employability needs, the ROTL evokes a model of individual change. This model, exhibited we suggest through processes of planning, is one predicated on the ‘mobility skills of inmates’ (Mincke 2017, 247) in that it is orientated towards spatial and temporal flow rather than stasis. Rehabilitation through the ROTL occurs through an individualised relationship to employment – the ROTL work placement – that requires capacities to manage the insecure parameters of such employment. This means finding, establishing and maintaining ongoing work amidst the ‘flow-form’ of the institutions that produce the conditions of appearance of stable employment; a challenge that is particularly pronounced when attempting to secure a job from ‘inside’ prison. Thus as a flow mechanism, the ROTL plays out the spatial and temporal experience of precarious work as that which is constituted by a ‘destabilisation of employment’ that is also a ‘destabilisation in the conduct of life’ (Lorey 2015, 13). The ROTL both produces and responds to destabilised employment: supplying a workforce that willingly accepts genres of insecure work (e.g. voluntary, fixed-term) and also trains workers to navigate such opportunities through encouraging planning. This ‘perpetual training’ or ‘destabilisation of the conduct of life’ occurs perhaps as subjugation – individualised risk management and behavioural change – but also as self-empowerment – the work placement as springboard. To examine these contrary and yet potentially simultaneous experiences of subjugation and self-empowerment through the ROTL, we return to HMP Brixton to flesh out experiences of planning for work post-release.

Planning as flows and frictions in future work

The experience of being granted ROTL challenges the notion that it is a straightforward mechanism of flow through porous carceral space. As indicated above, NOMS budget cuts have meant that many prisons are struggling to provide basic levels of service. This meant strains on processing of ROTL activity, reduced funding for (externally contracted) education and training services, and also low staffing levels that result in ‘bang-ups’, where prisoners are held in their cells for extended periods of time because staff numbers are deemed too low to securely allow free movement on the Wing. As a result, prisoners granted ROTL were often left waiting on the Wing, despite having the been deemed safe to leave the prison on day release. This friction in the anticipated flow of the ROTL encouraged planning for two reasons. Firstly, because of the promised exposure to the insecurities of employment post-release, conditions heightened by their stigmatized status as ex-offenders. As was articulated in our group discussion, ‘the second they see you’ve done time, most employers won’t look at you.’ And yet, another prisoner at the discussion group pointed out that employers who come to the prison job fairs and hire prisoners on ROTL placements realise that ‘we’ve got so much to lose,

they know we'll work ten times harder than the other guys.' Secondly, the waiting and deferral of temporary release combined with limited training opportunities meant that individual planning for future work becomes increasingly important. We outline three experiences of planning emerging from our ethnographic insights that illustrate how carceral space occurs as a relation to precarious work through planning: suspension, compulsion and improvisation. These are not intended to be exhaustive but rather indicative of some of the durations of the sentence that bind prisoners to, and confine, working practices, but also open opportunities for those nearing release.

Suspension

Planning as a process that 'makes work happen' but that is also necessarily removed from the action is a common experience for the men we met in prison. For these men, planning while 'doing time' operated through a sense of *suspension*. In this suspended state, planning occurred through fixation on the possibility of working presence, an immersive contemplation of potential action that, without realization, offered plenty of time to consider opportunities for failure. This was clear from one of our early discussion groups that focused on 'making plans for once you leave prison'. Building on previous conversations, we wanted to consider with the group the steps to establish a sense of stability outside of prison. Questions to prompt discussion included: what would it take to find a place to live? Re-establish connections with family? Find a stable job? What did those markers of 'rehabilitation' mean to individuals in practice? But despite our intentions to focus on what happens 'outside', the majority of the conversation stuck on all that could go wrong before the day of release. A combination of personal anxieties and unforeseen circumstances could 'get in the way' of the planned release date, let alone the first few hours, days and weeks outside. Rather than focus on individual plans, we ended up with a group effort discussing all the possible barriers to realising a plan in general. It became clear that as a form of suspension, planning was as much a time to consider how to be out of working action as well as in it. The opportunity to plan certainly involved inventing working conditions, but also identifying the possible 'sticks in the wheel' that could stall the plan – as an abstract design of order - to begin with.

Part of the struggle constituting this experience of suspension concerned the sense of self in relation to work. Here the porosity of carceral space occurred in part the imagination of oneself in an uncertain working life beyond prison. If the aspiration was to go into licit work, then prisoners were unsure about how to situate their past activities and thus unable to begin planning for suitable occupation. The contingency of future work was matched by their uncertain working identity; the relationship that Lorey (2015) defines as precariousness through pairing the destabilisation of employment with destabilisation in the conduct of life. In this precariousness then, prisoners were suspended between the former (criminal) and future (straight) self, a distinction that suffuses criminological literature (Matthews 2009). However, our discussions undermined this clear-cut distinction between criminal and straight skills (Venkatesh 2006; Hobbs 1988). Rather, 'transferable skills', such as logistics and leadership,

upset a clearly demarcated past/future self through occupation. Yet, although some prisoners recognised that the skills developed in criminal activity could lead to new (legal) work opportunities post-release, a more common refrain concerned the inability to suitably qualify the learning of these skills (e.g. through certificates and legal work experience) that might eventually result in their return to prison. As one prisoner remarked,

'The stigma can be hard to shift... I didn't want challenge and examination. I wasn't happy with my life. I was almost 30 and had spent 15 years in prison. But I felt safer where I was comfortable.'

Thus, the difficulty of finding legal work because of a lack of qualifications can mean a return to illicit activity and thus potential reconviction. These uncertainties surrounding positive possibilities for working futures considering their past activities meant a great deal of anxiety 'You think, will I have to beg for a bit of labour for the rest of my life?'

Planning work was therefore a way of managing yet also often intensifying anxieties over (temporary) disuse in prison. HMP Brixton has spaces and times of activity and inactivity, reflected in the contradictory stories circulating of prison/prisoners as idle, docile or out of control. For every person keen to get education/training certificates - to gain 'permission to speak' in a bureaucratic 'credentials' culture (Graeber 2015, 22) - there was another who refused 'that game' and instead would sit in his cell all day. We were told a number of times by prisoners (and occasionally staff) that such whiling away of time was helped by the availability of drugs, particularly 'spice', a form of synthetic cannabis. Some of the men on C Wing, despite nearing the end of their sentence, expressed a sense of redundancy more keenly than men on other Wings. As an officer escorting us to the Wing from the main gates once remarked, 'we give them a tiny window of light on C Wing.' The only D-Cat wing in HMP Brixton, the status of these prisoners was privileged compared to those on other wings, but it also meant the return to, or continuation of, incarceration was more intensely felt as spatio-temporal suspension (Moran 2012a; 2012b). The 'tiny window of light' illuminating prisoners' (potential) working futures was an unrelenting reminder of their current paralysis and how these bars were extended in the hurdles they faced from the first moment of release.

Thus the animated suspension of the plan operated in ambivalent relation to this sense that prisoners were 'running out of time'. Putting together a set of aspirations that might direct 're-entry' was an optimistic relation to working opportunities that often created a sense of urgency. This sense of acute but yet to be realised potential smacks of youth; the sort of burning madness that is desirous of everything at the same time. Given that many offenders commit crime and are incarcerated (on and off) from a young age, prison extends such 'youth' but also sees it fade. Youth is thus more than 'biological' state of becoming, as noted by those who have considered periods of suspension between 'adolescence' and 'adulthood' in precarious environments (Honwana and DeBoeck 2005). Youth in these accounts appears variously as waithood (Honwana 2012), protracted liminality (Thieme 2013), deferred aspirations (Venkatesh and Kassimir 2007), lag time (Hamilton and Hamilton 2009) and timepass (Jeffrey

2010). The experience of youth is cast in the shadow of failure, where ‘progress’ lacks and ‘development’ falters; yet is also paired with an enduring hope and ‘faith in action’ (Cooper and Pratten 2015). There are synergies in these accounts of the time of youth with those felt in prison, expressed as non-linear temporalities of ‘ageing’ experience. As Ray, who was 26 mentioned over a game of chess one Monday, ‘I feel old.’ The pressures of youthful opportunity were accentuated for former young offenders now entering their late twenties and early thirties who explained that, ‘the window between aspirations and realising my goals is narrowing.’ This ‘emerging adulthood’ (Arnett 2013) behind bars as Neal said, ‘feels like an emergency to me, and I can’t get it wrong anymore.’

But despite this acute sense of suspension in planning, its daily manifestations also constituted a ‘banal’ exercise in queuing, in learning how to manage waiting. Our exchanges with prisoners were often orientated around the uncertainty of when and whether ROTL would be granted, and where work placements would occur. In this uncharted queue, prisoners learnt to wait without spatio-temporal orientation or end point, displaying a ‘humble and artless dignity’ (Crary 2013, 123). As the disciplinary architecture of the prison was fluid, diffuse and unreliable, some prisoners sought to build their own structures to manage moments of slippage from routine. Derek, for example, spent weeks refurbishing the bathroom in his cell. This task that he proudly showed us at various stages, was done with almost overwhelming care and commitment, undertaken when his cell mate was away on home visits. The absorption in the incremental exercise of maintenance and eventual sense of achievement he found in this activity defied the apparently unproductive time of waiting, but it was also tinged with melancholy. This was a tentative form of work on the infrastructures of the institution, a gift to the prison that was already taking much from Derek. The prison, in the meantime, operated through a negation of reciprocity and continuous depersonalization through a plurality of (nominal) separations of space and time (wings, cells, rationed gym time, and so on). Thus this invisible queuing work engendered by planning was also a means through which ‘the conflict between the individual and the organisation’ (Crary 2013, 123) was felt. As much as waiting was time shared in common - learning how to take turns - it also resulted in frustrations when prison was a site where ‘all cultures are under one roof’, as Neal said. The condensing of ‘home-work-play’ could lead to exasperation, resentment and senses of compulsion, discussed next.

Compulsion

As the governor of HMP Brixton remarked during our first meeting, ‘prisoners have been let down’ in various ways throughout their lives by many institutions. This sentiment was echoed in the experience of the men we met; whether they recalled their time at school, with probation officers, or politicians; the social contract between citizens and the state or other official institutions was felt to have been broken, or was maybe non-existent in the first place. Against this back-drop, planning for work in prison took on a sense of *compulsion*, which produced for some prisoners a desire to take actions into one’s own hands. Insofar as planning for work was

understood as a commitment to rehabilitation, 'the plan' could be understood as part of the institutional 'will' or 'commitment' (Ahmed 2012). As indicated above, the prison was in principle committed to providing education and training opportunities inside the institution and beginning resettlement through work placements outside via ROTL. We could tell Derek's story as that of a model beneficiary of this institutional will. Derek worked at Bad Boy's Bakery in the prison where he transferred his creative skills as a graffiti 'artist' into the invention of the 'bacon brioche', and developed ambitions to become 'one of those fancy wedding cake makers'. Six months later, Derek was out on ROTL, training to be a baker in a supermarket chain, not quite the artisan but a step in the right direction he felt. So far, so rehabilitated: this was the institutional will in action as Derek was no longer interested in subversive acts of spraying his tag 'Aggro' on a wall near you, or making a living by dealing drugs or training pit bulls. He seemed committed to a straight existence of wedding cakes and compulsory happiness. But this telling of Derek's story belies the complex relationships between institutional will and what Ahmed (2012) terms institutional 'walls'. That is, the connection between what the institution plans to commit to, how those commitments are performed and with what implications.

The prison may have committed to rehabilitation, but this commitment resulted in other, divergent effects that were (sometimes) barriers to prisoners' rehabilitation. Thus 'rehabilitation' was felt by many prisoners to be a 'non-performative' institutional commitment (Ahmed 2012, 126), a term that had the momentum to circulate as a stated intent, but that did not 'acquire the force needed to bring something about' (p. 127). As with Ahmed's arguments concerning the forceful 'emptiness' of the commitment to institutional diversity, some prisoners explained that this performance of rehabilitation often served to conceal and perpetuate the problems it set out to challenge. Far from making work outside prison, our interlocutors were preoccupied with 'making prison work', which reflected a broader anxiety or belief that institutions worked against them. In this reading, the metaphorical 'revolving door' (of reoffending) seemed deliberately fitted by the architects of the prison, an act of institutional design that continued to keep 'hold of what has apparently been given up' (p. 126). Thus many of the men nearing the end of their sentence who were in part committed to performing the institutional will to rehabilitate, were also aware that they were coming up (again) against the institutional wall (or 'revolving door'). This wall is not simply the physical bricks that confine HMP Brixton's inmates, but rather a wall that only 'becomes apparent' through the 'practical labour' of 'coming up against' it (Ahmed 2012, 174). This sense of walls that only appear when you walk into them is something of the violent 'reality effect' (Graeber 2015, 85) of bureaucracy; the ways institutions can tend towards a 'culture of complicity' (p. 26) that organises a particular 'Real' as sovereign (p. 86), concealing the possibility that the world 'is something that we make, and could just as easily make differently' (p. 89).

It is in this sense that the more individual 'will' as a compulsion to plan emerged. By coming up against the inadequate plans of the institution, the men on C-Wing acquired their own critical orientation that enabled them to navigate idiosyncratic journeys to work amidst the

trickery of the prison's walls and revolving doors. A closer look at Derek's story exemplifies this. When we first met Derek in early 2016, he expressed contentment and pride with his work at Bad Boy's Bakery, recognizing that this was known as one of the better jobs to have in the prison. Yet he was also keen to prove himself outside the prison, and needed his ROTL to do so. He was especially anxious about being subject to the new Restricted ROTL regulations (mentioned earlier) because he was in for violent crime. Like many others on C Wing, he was waiting to get papers dealt with so that he could start the iterative process of 'release' from prison. Losing his patience to wait much longer, Derek eventually decided to quit his job at the bakery, and work on the wing at the commissary. When he got 'irritated with people's demands' and his co-workers' pettiness, he decided to shift to janitorial work on the wing. This was his plan: a series of 'demotions' as a strategy to get him seen by the C Wing officers, reminding them to pay attention to his case. Moving on from one of the more sought after work stations in the prison to take on 'menial' labour on the wing was a form of 'foot dragging' (Scott 1985) that complied with the rules of the system, but simultaneously operated as a means of resistance to elicit attention from the authorities that could facilitate his ROTL procedures. So despite 'their co-presence within a disciplinary space' there was by no means necessarily a 'common sense' for inmates' working activity (Yeung and Somashekhar 2016, 86). Derek was able to open different opportunities for action through a form of waiting by playing with the organisation's assumptions as to what he should do.

In this light, being compelled to plan might be framed as a form of 'anarchist/DIY performativity' (Berlant 2011, 261), a technique to make prison work through alternative ways of working the confines of imprisonment; or perhaps manipulating the porosity of carceral space. This recognises that like the wider world, prison is constituted by 'norms' that don't quite fit, as was illustrated by the work opportunities available. Although some prisoners were grateful for the education and training they received in prison, others expressed disaffection with the types of work for which they were being groomed. Andy, who was 29, spoke about growing up in a 'rough neighbourhood where prison gives you stripes' but also mentioned that in his younger years he had trained to become a ballet dancer. After a decade of being in and out of prison, the ballet a distant memory along with other stalled possibilities, he now had his ROTL doing construction with Thames Water. Andy was incisive and his remarks during discussion groups and individual conversations combined bitterness with apathy, but he also had become versed in 'the system'. His usual complacent body language (appearing unbothered was an important defense mechanism) was punctuated with frustration when he once explained:

'They don't deal with us as individuals, the system deals with the mass. That's why they put us into construction. The assumption is we are low-skilled and low intelligence.'

Andy's planned movements combining everyday complacency with moments of quiet outrage became acts of survival and adaptation to achieve the next simple end, often being the town visit with family. These were attempts to seize whatever opportunities arose in order to continue adhering to the rules of a game that often seemed to yield no winning hand, knowing,

as one prisoner stated, that ‘sometimes you need to accept plan B before you can get to plan A’. The prisoners went through the motions of various work stations in the prison for the possibilities that they might change something substantive, which necessarily involved forms of experimentation, examined below.

Experimentation

The men on C-Wing spoke of the skill of learning to do a lot with a little, both in and outside of prison. They knew that they would have to work ‘three times as hard as any other candidate for the job’, as Andy explained when recounting his interview with Thames Water. Planning was therefore also an experience of *experimentation*, a situated practice that occurred through improvisation with limited resources (Yeung and Somashekhar 2016). Within the prison, planning appeared as an experiment that translated into a working skill practised at a number of the sites of work occupying prisoners. National Prison Radio (NPR) was an example where a group of prisoners presented and produced radio programmes, planning and putting together schedules of songs and shout outs from and to others ‘locked down in the system’. Following various encounters with Eddie on C Wing, he was keen for us to visit him ‘at work’ in NPR. Clearly passionate about his job, Eddie said that working at the radio station didn’t feel like he was in prison. The arts of cutting jingles, queueing up songs, and laying appropriate beds were ways of playing with ‘knowledge of sequence in time’ (Thrift 2004, 178), experimenting with forms of finding a position as Eddie went along that allowed a semblance of order to appear. Whilst the radio shows never went out live (for security reasons), these practices of planning for being on ‘air’ involved forms of ‘comprehension much closer to that of the present’ (Thrift 2004, 179) of working outside prison. Recording the organised improvisation of being live practised the achievements of repetition that for Eddie became a way of rehearsing the production of the infrastructures of urban living, forms of cyclical time that collide and constitute the city as an ‘assemblage of different beats’ (Crang 2001, 189). Paradoxically, such exciting experiences of being ‘on air’ were generally not replicated in more menial but seemingly ‘live’ opportunities for work on ROTL.

Once out on ROTL working in a canteen, Eddie confessed that in some ways he preferred being inside prison making radio, rather than outside serving filtered coffee and greasy chips on a construction site. But the experiments in planning gained in such a role in prison were a form of working skill that were nonetheless useful outside. In particular, techniques of ‘arranging arrangements’ (Thrift 2004, 176) picked up at the radio station, but also more broadly through managing segments of ‘own time’ in prison amidst the institutional routine, were useful for approaching the ‘return’ to family and friends. A number of the prisoners spoke with varying degrees of detail of their difficult relationships with ‘close’ friends and family members that on the one hand had the potential to pull them back into ‘old (negative) habits’, but on the other could be key to ‘getting (re)settled’. For those in prison who identified as ‘business men’ or ‘hustlers’, they acknowledged that without their senses on the street, they no longer knew ‘what’s selling and what’s moving’. They would need their contacts to aid quick re-orientation

for their enterprise, whether such ‘doing business’ was legal or not. Reconnecting with these networks also provided the means to learn more broadly the changing social life of the city, including the increasingly ‘smart’ technology of phones and contactless payment for travel that were somewhat unfamiliar to inmates who had spent years in prison, but also more archaic tools. As one of our interlocutors joked when recounting his first meal out with his family down Brixton Hill:

‘I hadn’t used real cutlery in years. And these smart phones with their touch screens and shit. I just want to make a call and press buttons. I don’t need all the other fancy stuff.’

Plans to experiment with the familiar on the outside therefore to some extent sidelined the ‘disciplinary power’ of the prison. At the extreme, the prison appears as the sideshow to the real action of the city. It is the place that might ‘give you stripes’, as Andy suggested, but it is subsumed into wider ‘camp-thinking’ of gangs and the street articulated through ‘dualistic conflict between friends and enemies’ (Gilroy 2002, 82). However, through the ‘letting go’ or ‘setting free’ of these men, prison can still be understood to produce and maintain ‘the condition, the state, of the dispossessed’ (Butler and Spivak 2007, 5). Going back out to work in the city certainly in one sense involved becoming unconfined for the men out on ROTL and eventually fully released, but it also meant being discontinued by the state and ‘given over to other forms of power that may or may not have state-like features’ (ibid. p. 6). But perhaps more common than this ‘denigration’ of urban citizenship into street soldiery (Gilroy 2002) were experiments to reclaim the terms of the urban familiar through the porosity of carceral space. Rather than foregrounding institutional constraints of prison, the ROTL enabled the ‘fantastical’ and ‘unrealistically optimistic’ (Seim 2016: 3) plans hatched inside to unfold through adaptations to and of the outside environment. Fragments of Neal’s story illustrates this. Neal was in his late 40s and wise to all manner of institutions - the corporation, the street, the prison - and had a fascination with and passion for organisational culture. After meeting (at one of the prison’s regular employment fairs) the director of a social enterprise that aimed to improve work opportunities for ex-offenders, Neal was able to line up an interview with them, then volunteer placement out on ROTL, and eventually the promise of a full time job upon release.

Rather than primarily working in their catering outlets, Neal had been given a ‘corporate social responsibility’ role for developing, as he put it, ‘the organisational culture’ for the social enterprise. This enabled him to draw on the heightened awareness of the possibilities of planned experimentation that he had built up in prison. The self-government sometimes encouraged, sometimes under-mined by oscillations of institutional attention and disregard, resulted in him conducting what he called regular ‘complacency checks’ on himself. Neal explained that these ‘check-ups’ took place every few months and enable him to make sure he wasn’t ‘taking anything for granted’, encouraging him to keep refining and redefining his goals. Through such self-management Neal navigated the ‘tension between unreflected

habitual action and acts of creativity’ (Yeung and Somashekhar 2016, 85), with the intention of falling much more often on the side of the latter. The time spent coming up with wacky ‘virtual competitors’ to drive innovation in his diverse business ideas whilst in prison enabled him to quickly jump into and think with ambitious creativity about the ‘organisational culture’ of a coffee shop. When we visited one of the catering outlets operating on a construction site in Greenwich set up by the social enterprise for which he was working, he was already putting these ideas into action, intent on helping other prisoners find craft and pride in ‘serving the perfect latte’ through forms of workplace reward. Thus for Neal and others, planning in the prison was an experiment for planning work outside. And importantly, it was this kind of experimentation in planning that could at least sometimes turn the mundane practices of working in a site-canteen serving bacon baps into aspirational notions of professional development and self-realization.

Conclusion

In April 2017, Andy contacted us with a short email saying ‘I got out’. We’ve communicated since. He struggled to get work during the first few weeks, but soon found a temporary job in construction, remarking:

‘I know I’m not exercising my full potential, but it’s a start. I need to take care of myself. But damn. Routine is hard work!’

The ‘hard work’ at this stage involved a combination of proving to your probation officer (and yourself) that you’re ‘staying straight’ through weekly visits, but also demonstrating the capacity to transition from sleeping in hostel accommodation to finding your own place. With prohibitive housing costs but a restriction on how far you can live away from work whilst on probation, Andy looked for shared housing, after the council told him he was not eligible for council housing as an ‘able bodied working male’. When we asked him where he was staying in the meantime, he said, ‘you know, here and there.’ This first mile out reflected a form of experimentation and adaptation to structural and personal adversity, pooling from the skills and hustle exercised before prison, but with a determination to ‘not go back (to prison) this time.’

Andy’s experience of the entangled insecurities of work and life post-release returns us to where we started: contemporary conditions of working uncertainty in the UK. Through an ethnographic focus on prisoners nearing release from HMP Brixton, we have shown how structural conditions of labour precarity are often lived through forms of mundane stability. This extends literature on the porosity of prison boundaries by emphasizing how carceral space is constituted through forms of flow *and* friction. This is not to focus on the disciplinary institution as limit-form, occurring through fixed spaces and times, but rather on the more free-floating control of flow-form institutions with ever shifting boundaries (Deleuze 1992; Minckle 2017). In such a view, the prison and the factory give way to more mobile, fluid mechanisms for organising social space and time. This is exemplified in the current rehabilitation agenda for prisons in England and Wales that emphasises training prisoners for work both in and out

of prison, with the perhaps secondary effect of reducing reoffending and thus alleviating pressure on the capacity of the penal estate. The ROTL operates as a flow mechanism within this ‘free-floating’ rehabilitation process, producing the porosity of incarceration through experiences of precarious work. The flows enabled by ROTL both result in and respond to the destabilisation of employment and thus position rehabilitation as a destabilisation in the conduct of life that encourages contrary modes of subjugation and self-empowerment. Rather than a closed system then, through the potential work placement granted by the ROTL, prison becomes a space and time for planning; for honing the mobility skills needed to navigate precarious working futures. These experiences of suspension, compulsion and experimentation in planning for work, though orientated towards flow, also often involve the *frictions* of waiting, deferral and interruptions *in* prison rather than opportunities for release.

There are wider implications to these flows *and* frictions of planning work in carceral space. One is practical, and working within the confines of the carceral system, concerns the provision of opportunities for prisoners post-release. As has been indicated by Maddrell (2017, 225), the ROTL work placement can be understood as a form of “social mobility” for prisoners, “in the sense of moving within different social groups and adapting socially.” However, the difficulties experienced by prisoners in our research in setting foot outside prison once ROTL had been granted indicate its insufficient function for rehabilitative purposes. Whilst exploring the functionings of ROTL placements goes beyond the scope of this paper, our research suggests that the ROTL process is neither completely functional as a ‘socialising’ nor as an ‘economic’ device, insofar as the stalling of ‘release’ (on temporary license) and limitations of work opportunity reproduce forms of social exclusion and economic vulnerability. From the perspective of criminal justice, this is a matter that merits further policy attention. However, we have also illustrated that despite these shortcomings of the ROTL, prisoners engage in processes of planning for work that bypass or adapt the institutional processes for rehabilitation. Such planning therefore has implications for how labour precarity is addressed in research. Identifying forms of work or relations to employment as structurally precarious in terms of their contractual insecurity and uncertain duration is an important but nonetheless incomplete rendering of labour precarity. By focusing on quotidian and agentic ways of relating to working futures, we have indicated that experiences of precarity are constituted by forms stability and routine, as much as uncertainty. This reading of *planning* also points to the importance of considering the paradoxical subjectivities of precarious workers (Lorey 2015), as simultaneously *vulnerable* and as *agents* of alternative working futures despite changing labour conditions.

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